

MARCH 8, 1984

One small snow and a misty morning have turned the stubble green in parts of the Shortgrass Country. Sheep are bard at work hunting scattering of grass and tender weeds. Cattle, of course, are still under winter siege; however, we are beginning to notice calves showing signs of thinner residue that means changes in the milk supply.

Over the first weekend in March a raging wind crossed the Plains and bore down upon us. Sunday afternoon, we had variable gales, intermittent showers, constant dust, and a cold wave. Up at Lubbock, the airport was closed without knowing whether it was from visibility or wind or rain that caused it.

We'd had a good week until that weather struck. We were right on the edge of being able to stop feeding a few pastures of the sheep. I knew it was a fragile situation. Nevertheless during a winter as hard as this one has been, it doesn't take much luck or much promise to look like a windfall.

One critical area was our supply of hay. We'd been cheating and saving, hoping to get through on what was left in the barn. Had we fed hay to everything that needed extra roughage, we'd have been broke by Christmas.

On the day we were checking on the hay, I helped the guy I work with scatter some alfalfa for a pasture of sick sheep. We must have broken out 50 or 60 bucks worth of hay. I hate to admit the amount as I'm talking about 100 or so ewes worth maybe \$40 a head in the wool. I know we are all in this game together, but whoever I explain the economics of the ranch game to, I always end up covering up the last 19 percent of the truth, if not a tad more.

Before we'd get the wires off the bales, the ewes would be eating and tearing into the edges. Like I told my partner, I doubt if there ever was a woolie or a hollow horn that realized what a bale of hay cost. It was about to cross my eyes watching those greedy old sisters grabbing at the stems and leaves. It was first sign of life they'd shown in months.

I don't suppose it'd make any difference whether a sheep knows how precious a leaf of alfalfa is when it's imported from New Mexico. I've watched unpapered aliens from Old Mexico learn the wide range of values for groceries over here. Those foot soldiers developed appetites for food that their wives would have had to use double ringed hobbles and thick blindfolds to get down their throats at home.

After they ceased to be ranch hands, I tried to persuade some of them to alter their mandarin approaches and maraschino tastes. In case they ever did have to go back to cowboying or working in Mexico, they were taking a chance of suffering withdrawal pains as they went back on beans and tortillas.

Once I took an ex-cowboy back to the border when he was sick and out of a job. I think his main trouble was from eating too much rich food. In the days I'd worked him before he got his big job in town, the biggest health problem he ever had was from Bull Durham tobacco blowing in his eyes when he was rolling a cigarette on his horse. I looked on it as an act of mercy to get him back where sugar was a luxury.

So I suppose if the livestock knew the ends and the means we'd go to, to save their lives, we'd lose control of them too. We just need a half-inch of rain and a still day to set up the lambing season.

I haven't heard whether the Lubbock airport was open this morning. It might have blown away.